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ABSTRACT

This paper maintains that many language-minority children in the United States are being given dis-equalized services by schools through inappropriate test screening. It is asserted that schools often use inappropriate standardized instruments to determine the English language fluency of limited English proficient (LEP) and language minority children, and that these instruments are often administered by school employees with little or no knowledge of the child's first language or culture. The interrelationship between test bias, test discrimination, and test fairness are also discussed. The paper concludes that schools need to address the cultural diversity of their student population and ensure that children's language proficiency is evaluated in an unbiased, non-discriminatory, and fair manner. (MDM)

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The Dis-equalizing impact of Standardized Testing on Language-Minority Children

By James Brian Smith

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The Dis-equalizing Impact of Standardized Testing On Language-Minority Children

by James Brian Smith

Introduction

There is little question that many language-minority children in the United States are being given dis-equalized services by many schools through inappropriate test screening. In this writer's view, school placement decisions predicated on tests given language-minority children in the English language, who are not demonstrably fluent English bilingual, [1] are both irresponsible and immoral. Children so affected should be able to invoke habeas corpus, thereby holding school officials accountable for their wrongful imprisonment.

Such words do not constitute irresponsible hyperbole! This writer is convinced that readers becoming indignant over conclusions such as these have simply never felt the sting of biased testing, nor experienced the heartbreak, personal devastation, and loss of self-esteem spawned by inappropriate school placements made every day resulting from culturally and linguistically, biased testing. Such indignation has no impact, whatsoever, on the fact that such bogus placements are taking place.

This discussion is intended to remind readers that the educational issues of language minority pupils are complex

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[1] For an excellent guideline on the assessment of questionable bilinguals, see: Tom B. Gillung, ed. Providing Special Education Services to Limited-English-Proficient Handicapped Students, Administrative Guidelines, (Connecticut: Department of Education, 1990), 65.

indeed. It is crucial that readers consider the paradigms of cultural pluralism and multicultural/bilingual education at the outset of this discussion to acquire an essential foundation and historical context for the national struggle being carried out by advocates of language minority pupils and their multi-cultural identities. If the best educational interests of limited English proficient (LEP) children are to be served, well-informed advocacy must be forthcoming to replace the ill-informed practices used in so many of America's schools today with respect to the testing and placement of LEP children. For it is essential that we investigate, and come to recognize, one of the most powerful tools responsible for disenfranchising LEP youngsters: culturally and linguistically biased tests!. No instrument of the status quo more adversely impacts language minority children, either intentionally or inadvertently, than test bias when used as a medium of social engineering. There are those who will say that "...our intentions are good!" But the net result is the same: inappropriate testing discrimination is discrimination misused, no matter how it comes about.

It is a fact that America's school departments live at the mercy of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) with respect to non-English speaking, and limited English proficient pupils entering the country. There is little or no co-ordination between the INS and the Federal Department of Education for assisting recent immigrant children in coping with life in the new (to them) culture in the English language; nor

has Congress lived up to its responsibility for providing adequate funding for the appropriate transition of school-age children from a foreign language and culture to the level of fluent bilingualism [2] required for developing a successful life in a new society. Neither, should we overlook the fact that the United States has many indigenous language-minority pupils in myriads of ethnic and cultural communities making up this country's multicultural mosaic, not the least of which are the Native American children who are grievously ill-served by biased tests designed to be used in the dominant non-Indian culture.

Once, then, these children (from whatever source) arrive at their neighborhood schools, more often than not they are given tests to determine their fluency in English. It is a sad commentary on our educational system, that too frequently, such children are improperly assessed for school placement, by school employees with little or no knowledge of the child's first language and culture of birth. Such placement assessments are frequently carried out with testing instruments biased in favor of English fluent pupils, and the resulting placements bear little resemblance to program schedules that might more properly occur if language-appropriate assessment and thoughtful guidance services were made part of the enrollment procedures. Also, since monies are scarce in many school districts for dealing with

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[2] Many experts believe that five to seven years of instructional experience are required for developing true fluent-bilingualism. The three years required by many state and federal agencies for acquiring English competency makes a mockery of this fact.

bilingual or limited English proficient (LEP) issues, all too frequently such children are summarily dumped into the ranks of special education where funds can be more easily accessed.

What is biased testing?

This author, in another work on testing bias, indicates that "...bias is the presence of some characteristic of a test item that results in differential performance of two individuals or two groups, of equal ability, but from different subgroups." [3]

Jensen points out:

> [i]f the results of testing are of importance to the individual, the bilingual child should be tested in both languages by an [examiner] who is fluent in the [pupil's] primary language and its particular localisms, and the test should be scored in terms of the total number of correct responses in either language, with proper corrections for guessing...[4]

Bias, then, "...is differential validity of a given interpretation of a test score for any definable, relevant subgroup of test takers." [5]

Bias is, as Jensen further elaborates, "...a form of error: it is error of measurement (unreliability) and error of prediction (invalidity) that are related to the individual's group membership. In the most general terms, bias exists when [the employment of test scores as a measure of success or

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[3] James Brian Smith, A Study Of Item Bias In The Maine Educational Assessment Test, (Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: Boston College Graduate School of Education, 1993), 11.

[4] Arthur R. Jensen, Bias in Mental Testing, (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 607.

[5] Robert L. Linn, ed. Educational Measurement Third Edition, (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1989), 205.

accountability of schools, or as a means of course placement] discriminates individuals differently than does the criterion measure of performance." [6]

An additional background piece to this discussion of bias is the interrelationship between and among bias, discrimination, and fairness. Remember, Linn defines bias as the differential validity of a given interpretation of a test score for any definable, relevant subgroup of test takers, that is studied in the objective world through statistical analysis. In the context of this discussion, if certain test items used to place language-minority children in school programs cause these children to be treated differentially from the monolingual English children also taking the test, and who are of definably equal abilities, then by definition item bias is present in the test so used.

Jensen defines discrimination as a fundamental concept in psychometrics predicated on discovering... "reliable measurements of differences between persons, or of differences within any one person...." [7] If, then, item bias is present in a test as discussed above, there should indeed be indications of discrimination between the two groups analyzed by virtue of the fact that some items are answered differently by one group compared with the other. But in no way should such discrimination be assumed to indicate differences in <u>ability</u>, unless overall scores on such tests have been matched and

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[6] Jensen, 48.

[7] Ibid., 57.

compared, individual by individual.

Finally, fairness, says Jensen, is a concept more properly explored in the study of moral philosophy or metaphysics. [8]

People who work with tests, must not confuse the concepts involved in these three terms: bias, discrimination, and fairness. Tests by definition discriminate on one basis or another. Without such discrimination, life in an information-rich society would be unmanageable. But as has been shown, tests can also be biased in that the criterion being tested may treat one subgroup differently from another. In this discussion an appreciation of how tests can discriminate coupled with reliable methods of looking for item bias can raise the probability that a test is fair with respect to the purposes of that test, and to the uses of the information gained from giving the test in the first place. Otherwise it is possible that such item bias could lead to a very different definition of discrimination...a definition which could include unfortunate concepts such as bigotry, intolerance, prejudice, preference, and judgement. In such an instance, fairness could not be left to the more esoteric domains of moral philosophy and metaphysics where Jensen suggests they belong; rather, fairness, would have to be placed into consideration in the domain of assessment which leads to evaluation which leads to accountability and educational decision-making, otherwise there would be an indefensible element of farce in educational assessment as Cummins suggests history

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[8] Ibid., 49.

bears out:

> Historically, assessment has played the role of legitimizing the disabling of minority students. In some cases assessment itself may play the primary role, but more often it has been used to locate the "problem" within the minority student, thereby screening from critical scrutiny the subtractive nature of the school program, the exclusionary orientation of teachers towards minority communities, and transmission models of teaching that inhibit students from active participation in learning....From the present perspective, however, it must be emphasized that [biased] assessment is carried out by well-intentioned individuals who, rather than challenging a socioeducational system that tends to disable minority students, have accepted a role definition and an educational structure that makes [biased] assessment virtually inevitable. [9]

Such use of testing must be recognized, analyzed, and adjustments made if testing equity is to be achieved. Concepts of social justice and fairness inexorably impact discussions like this...moral philosophy notwithstanding! Realistic and necessary discrimination forming the basis of all manner of decision making, is and will continue to be based on testing--unbiased testing--which must and should serve children in equitable ways.

Where should we go from here?

Our discussion indicates, then, that there must be much discussion in American educational circles around the cross-cultural concerns of bilingual/ multicultural education and the rights of children from language minority populations. Surely non-biased cross-cultural assessment ought to be a topic uppermost in the minds of psychometricians as they strive to

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[9] Jim Cummins, "Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention," Harvard Educational Review, 56, no. 1 (February 1986): 28.

better serve their increasingly multiculturally diverse clientele.

Williams believes that:

> ...the model used to assess performance and competence in this society is monocultural....A main criticism is that the model ignores the relevance of culturally different experiences that foster other equally important competencies essential to the survival of the group or individual....In essence, the failure to consider a pluralistic assessment model--in evaluating, placing, and selecting minorities, in curriculum planning and instruction, and in all phases of test construction, use, and interpretation--underlies most criticism of aptitude and achievement tests. [10]

This author has examined bias in testing as an impact area within the paradigms of cultural pluralism and multicultural/bilingual education as such bias might impact screening and placement tests. Given the compelling demographics in the United States today…the culturally pluralistic framework of our society as it were…one would hope for high levels of cultural and linguistic sensitivity among experts developing tests appropriate for all America's pupils, not just the English speaking pupils. Gordon and Terrell in their collaborative, contrasting the social context in which tests are developed with the present-day social context in which tests must be interpreted, conclude:

> In the pursuit of process-sensitive [assessment] instruments designed to elicit data descriptive of the functional and conditional aspects of learner behavior, future psychological assessment may need to: (a) incorporate a broader conception of intelligence and the ways in which it is manifested; (b) take greater account of the relationships between the examinee,

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[10] Teresa Scotton Williams, "Some Issues In The Standardized Testing of Minority Students," Boston University Journal of Education: 192-3.

> situational characteristics, and the performance of mental functions; (c) be more sensitive to different access to the requisite prior experiences on which developed ability is based; and (d) be more mindful of the extent to which identity and cultural tradition may influence the attributional character of stimulus material.
>
> Process-sensitive assessment should seek to be comprehensive in its coverage of the examinee's response capabilities. The gains in comprehensiveness and utility garnered in process-oriented testing may be offset somewhat by loss of some of the precision that has been so highly valued in standardized testing, but the precision is no longer as important within the present social context for testing. [11]

Since upwards of forty states are now mandating accountability tests, and all states are finding it necessary to deal with LEP youngsters, and indeed, since the federal government is considering national educational accountability testing, it seems imperative that we explore the question of how the language-minority status of many millions of students is impacted, performance-wise, on school accountability and placement instruments which have achieved such a high profile in the United States in such a relatively short historical time period; that is, since the publication of "A Nation At Risk" in 1982.

If placement tests are to be routinely used with LEP children, then school administrators must be made aware of the limits to predictability in tests designed for one language group and then used for placement purposes in other language groups. Also educational testing experts (psychometricians) responsible

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[11] Edmund W. Gordon and Molidawn D. Terrell, "The Changed Social Context of Testing," American Psychologist, 36, no. 10 (October 1981): 1170-71.

for developing and carrying out testing in cross-cultural situations must be made aware that they have a moral obligation to be concerned about "…the broader concerns of social justice and the appropriateness of test use for groups affected by testing."

With the self esteem of so many culturally diverse children at stake, along with the cultural and linguistic integrity of so many non-English speaking American families, such a discussion as this may contribute positively to the body of knowledge indicating that careful thought and planning need to be a part of America's educational "evaluation and placement" processes with respect to cross-cultural assessment in specific. For the political demands for expediency need not sacrifice the overriding requirements for sound pedagogy and equitable assessment. [12]

In summary.

Bias has been defined as differential validity with respect to test performance by any definable, relevant subgroup of test takers. It has been looked at as an impact area in the historical struggle between the dominant English speaking culture, and the minority cultures within the paradigms of cultural pluralism and multicultural/bilingual education.

Garcia and Garcia conclude their related work by asking:

> Why are there so few minority doctors, teachers, lawyers, and engineers?...With few exceptions [current school] reforms fail to address the real causes of

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[12] Smith, 91-2.

> failure in the schools, such as the multicultural nature of America with its numerous implications, which are complex and difficult to understand. [13]

Perhaps through the foregoing discussion, the reader will have been convinced that the use of standardized placement tests for determining school programs for language-minority pupils is at best problematic, if not in many cases, downright inappropriate. People who care about schools working effectively for their pupil clients must work together to find better ways of serving limited English proficient children through appropriate testing, and in-so-doing, address the scathing indictment of American education pointed out by Garcia et al.

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[13] Ione Garcia and Peter A. Garcia, "Testing for Failure: Why Children Fail in School and Life," Teacher Education Quarterly, (Fall 1989): 85-6.

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